



I heard about [American War](#) back in December, and finally got my hands on a copy a few days after it was available for purchase. After reading the first couple of pages, I was hooked. It wasn't only the subject matter that pulled me in, but the way in which Omar El Akkad writes brings his story into vivid color. I recently caught up with the author and we discussed American War.

Joe: Omar, the title of your debut novel is the first thing that caught my eye several months ago. Can you tell us what American War: A Novel is about?

Omar: American War tells the story of a second American civil war that takes place about 60 years from now. The war begins after the federal government decides to impose a prohibition on the use of fossil fuels. Even though most of the world has moved on to other

sources of fuel by then, and climate change has destroyed much of the U.S. coastline and drowned Florida entirely, a number of southern states still decide to secede rather than go along with prohibition. The novel follows the Chestnuts, a family living in southernmost Louisiana, as they are displaced from their home by war and forced into a southern refugee camp.

Joe: All of your previous work that I've read has been non fiction articles. What made you take the leap to fiction?

Omar: I've been a fiction writer ever since I learned how to write. For ten years I worked as a journalist, but throughout that time I wrote fiction in my off hours, working on novels and short stories between the hours of midnight and five in the morning. Fiction has always been the most comforting space for me, the place where I find it easiest to discover what it is I believe and why I believe it. American War is my first published novel, but certainly not my first attempt at long-form fiction.

Joe: Your book has several powerful messages. What do you want readers, especially those of us in uniform, to take away from American War?

Omar: I subscribe to the notion that once a novel goes out into the world, it's author loses all claim to what readers should take away from it. That said, I hope readers find American War to be a defense of nuance, a book concerned chiefly with the gray space between Us and Them. I hope they take from it the message that there exists no foreign kind of suffering, no foreign kind of rage - that we all react to injustice in much the same way. And lastly, I hope they read the story of Sarat Chestnut, the novel's protagonist, as an argument in support of the idea that it is possible to understand why a person does something without condoning the thing they do. I don't think anyone who's ever put on a military uniform will be unfamiliar with these themes.

Joe: As a military leader, I recognize that reading is a critical component of my professional growth. Do you think fiction is as important as nonfiction for a person's development?

Omar: I hold the possibly unpopular view that fiction is not simply as important as non-fiction in this regard, but more important. I wrote non-fiction professionally for ten years, and I believe journalism in particular is an absolutely vital societal glue, without which total chaos reigns. But I also believe that the single most important component of personal development is the messy, difficult business of empathy. And nothing nurtures empathy more than reading other people's stories - not their facts, not their sanitized statistics, but

their stories, the made-up worlds in which they seek comfort.

Joe: Do you have any advice for a reader who wants to start writing fiction but doesn't know where to begin?

Omar: I have three pieces of advice, none of which are particularly original or innovative, but all of which have been invaluable to me. First, read. Read everything; read good books because they will grant you a kind of literary permission, and read bad books because they will grant you an entirely different kind of literary permission. Read out loud – find passages such as the prologue of *The Grapes of Wrath* and read it out loud and listen to the music in it. Second, write. Write not to sell stories or to get published – that comes whenever it comes – but to get to the good stuff. All good ideas live beneath a mountain of bad ones, and the only way to clear out the bad ones is to put them down on paper. Third, re-write. Editing is, for me, the most infuriating part of the process, but also the most vital. It doesn't just make the writing better, it helps the writer avoid the fatal literary disease of falling in love with their own sentences. The idea that immaculate fiction is born immaculate is utter nonsense; everything gets edited and edited and edited again.

I encourage readers to pick up a copy of [American War: A Novel!](#) Also, check out Omar's [website](#) or follow him on Twitter [@omarelakkad](#).

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